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Metonymic

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Metonymic

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Thesis submitted to the
College of Creative Arts
at
West Virginia University
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
emphasizing
Ceramic Sculpture

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Division of Art and Design
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Abstract

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Thomas Stollar

This thesis intends to support and describe *Metonymic*, a Masters of Fine Arts exhibition. The exhibition was the result of recorded introspection during the month of January 2012. *Metonymic* (Image 1) aimed to highlight the importance of seemingly meaningless everyday occurrences, feelings, and emotions on the growth of one's personality. Ultimately the exhibition emphasizes the abstract nature of human personality, and its unimaginable complexities.



(Image 1) Thomas Stollar, *Metonymic*, 2012.

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Acknowledgments

I wonder how much of an impact the smiling, random stranger has on the world. I say this because there are so many people I could thank for small acts of kindness that have aided in my successes.

More specifically I would like to thank my professors and friends for the energy and experience they were willing to share with me. The members of my committee, Shoji Satake, Robert “Boomer” Moore, Joseph Lupo, Jason Lee, and Jennifer Allen, all had faith in my abilities and allowed me to fail in order to learn. I would also have had no chance of success without the mentoring of Dylan Collins, Kristina Olson, Allison Helm, Dana Humberson, and the fabulous administrative services of Patsy Weaver, and Katherine Graham. I would also like to deeply thank fellow graduate students Aaron Anslow, Mike Loop, Morgan Milders, Erica Passage, and Vlad Basarab for their insights on what to do, and occasional examples of what not to do. Most importantly, thanks to my parents for being lovingly supportive, and last but not least thanks to all those people who change my life everyday with a simple smile.

Introduction

Metonymic: noun (pl. metonymies)

is a figure of speech used in rhetoric in which a thing or concept is not called by its own name, but by the name of something intimately associated with that thing or concept¹

Metonymic attempts to illuminate the importance of seemingly trivial, everyday events by giving them a physical presence. The exhibition is comprised of 219 interchangeable blocks that correspond to a journal of chronicled daily experiences. The journal documents everyday incidents from the 31 days of January 2012, and attempts to emphasize the importance of everyday, commonplace events in order to reveal the significance they play in shaping personality. The number of blocks created during each day is then decorated with a symbol representing what I deem to be the most insightful experience of that particular day.

In the end the blocks represent certain experiences and combine to create a metaphor that represents the way my personality was formed during January. This examination of personality could be considered a self-portrait in many respects. Although, unlike traditional self-portraits this exhibition focuses more on the abstract, psychological nature of the self as compared to the physical manifestation of the figure.

¹ James Mickleborough Greenwood. *Studies in English Grammar: A Comprehensive Course for Grammar Schools, High Schools, and Academies*, (New York City: Silver Burdett, 1893), 222.

Historically the ceramic arts have been based around the conservative logic of consumerism, and object based material investigation. For example the popularity of Chinese porcelain (Image 2) in the west during the 16th thru 18th centuries was based less around artistic expression and more on status-based consumerism. In the same way the popularity of Japanese



(Image 2) Chinese export porcelain, Circa 1700.
<http://www.artfinding.com/Artwork/Ernahrung-Gefasse/Chinese-export-porcelain/6808.html?LANG=al>

wood fired pottery is often based around the aesthetics of process and materials (Image 3). In this way ceramics has been historically based around the object. Recently contemporary ceramic arts practice has begun to escape the object as a sole basis for meditating on artistic ideas, and instead becoming emboldened by new possibilities and changes in cultural attitudes. For example artist Del Harrow



(Image 3) Shigaraki Tamba Jar, 16th -17th century
http://www.anagama.co.uk/5-1_oldpots.html

(Image 4) appropriates the objects that he

creates repeatedly in different installations. The meaning of these objects then changes as they are installed in new locations along side different objects. Historian Glen R. Brown expresses this change in both Harrow's work and also in ceramics in general as,



(Image 4) Del Harrow, *Untitled (Nurse Log)*, 2009.
<http://ereview.org/2010/06/23/combining-the-artificial-and-the-natural/>

“A notable irony of recent ceramics history that the most significant developments in 20th-century sculpture (the descent of objects from the monumental permanence of plinth and pedestal toward the vicissitudes of a wandering life and the dispersal of meanings of these objects from a firm grounding in form onto the shifting scenarios of contextually) have together exerted an influence on sculpture in clay that is still tentative enough to be associated with innovation and even eccentricity.”²

Metonymic also borrows from both modernist and post-modernistic ideals by relying on objects that have the power to transcend reality, and at the same time play on dematerialized ideas of instillation, process, and documentation as a way of captivating the viewer into greater participation with the work.

² Glen R. Brown. “Del Harrow, Objects and Orbits.” *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, Issue 84 (2011): 80.

Journalled

To me it appears that in this age of science and reason introspection holds little value in the modern systems of knowledge. Introspection is difficult to measure and quantify as a research based practice, and yet, “A renaissance of interest in the qualitative approach to the study of everyday social life is encouraging many researchers to depart from positivistically inspired methods to seek other approaches,”³ such as “Systematic Self-Observation.”⁴ Systematic Self-Observation is a field of study aimed at systematically documenting the ordinary feature of everyday self-observation,⁵ and gives rise to new research possibilities. The research done for *Metonymic* should not be classified as scientific, but the fact that researchers are taking introspection more seriously legitimizes the information gained from such inquiry.

The project began with the creation of a journal to chronicle my most thought provoking daily experiences of January 2012. Each day’s ideas, interactions, feelings, emotions, conversations, images, and/or insightful experiences were recorded. I could then choose that day’s most important experience. This significant experience is then understood to play a large role in defining my personality, and conscious understanding of the experience leads to greater self-comprehension.

³ Wheeler, L. “Self-recording of events in everyday life: Origins, types, and uses,” *Journal of Personality*, no. 59(3) (1991): 339-354.

⁴ Noelle Rodriguez. *Systematic Self-Observation*. (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2002), 7.

⁵ Rodriguez, *Systematic Self-Observation*, 4.

The journal became a way of capturing the “art” that happens while creating art. Often viewers only see the objects that an artist creates, and have little insight into the profound experiences that happen during the creation process. This project attempted to close the gap between simple experiences and artistic processes, by making the experiences the catalyst for the art itself. *Metonymic* uses mundane experiences as inspiration for artistic objects, and tries to ingrain them with loftier intentions, and the journal is exhibited to create a link from the artist to the art work .

This idea of trying to give value to things that are not valued much by society is not a new idea in the field of art. Gustave Courbet's (1819-1877)

Stone Breakers was a ground breaking

painting (Image 5), because it shed light upon, and gave precedence to one of the

lowest stations of social status through the media of painting, which was reserved

for those subjects of high status. In contemporary art too, the idea of the mundane

being given precedence is evident. Andy Warhol's examinations into everyday

household goods, like the Campbell soup can, silver ware, and the appropriation of

newspaper photos are just one example. Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg,

John Chamberlain, and scores of other modern and contemporary artists have taken

on the task of trying to close the gap between the high status of art, and the

everyday happenings of life.



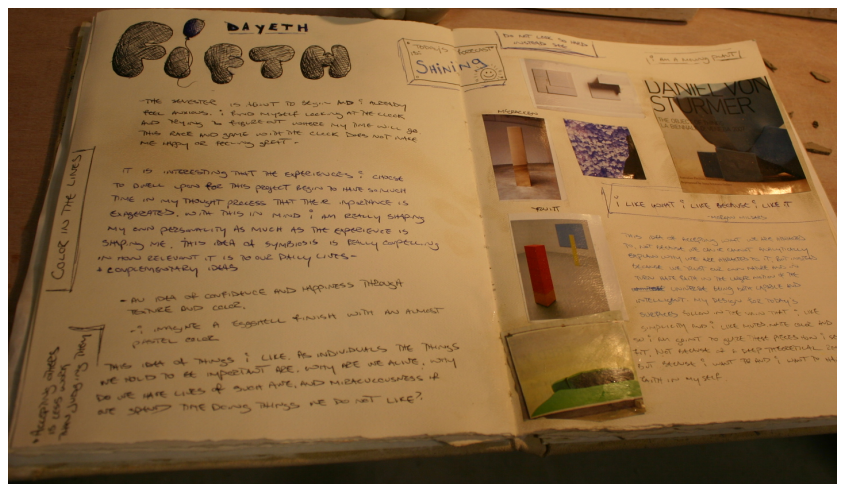
(Image 5) Gustave Courbet, *Stone Breakers*, Oil on Canvas, 1849.

<http://www.spinozablue.com/2009/01/1500/>

Overall the journal is intended to be relaxed and approachable, and as an aesthetic object it has a personal, handmade quality to it. The text was written unceremoniously, ideas were usually scrawled erratically in a stream of conscious manner, and images were pasted spontaneously. Had the book been traditionally made, I believe it would lose its sincerity, and not be as engaging or provocative to inspect. The entries are varied reflections of a personal nature they come directly from conversations, or from some other outside source, such as radio or magazines. An example of an average entry:

“This idea of accepting what we are attracted to, not because we can or cannot analytically explain why we are attracted to it, but instead because we trust our own nature, and in turn have faith in the larger notion of the universe we are a part of being both capable and intelligent.”

This quote comes from Day Five (Image 6), *I wish I Were Calmer*. The title of which directly correlates a want to trust in my own nature, and accept intuition,



(Image 6). Thomas Stollar, Day 5, 2012.

instead of, or at least equal to, the ideals that are allocated by society.

In another attempt to imbue the journal with meaning the cover was made from the wood that had covered the worktable during the project. Critic Jonathan

Goodman states, “Documentation, no matter how faithful it may be to events, can truly – and only – be read as interpretation,”⁶ At the start of Day One the worktable was recovered with a sheet of 1/8th plywood, after the project ended the plywood was removed and used to create the journal cover and the pedestal



(Image 7) Thomas Stollar, *Journal*, 2012.

that the journal was exhibited on (Image 7). As the work was being created the wood became marked and scared with residue from the making process. The plywood was, in some ways, a record of the project just as much as the journal, yet

the experiences remain unreadable fragments of lived experience.



(Image 8) Thomas Bayrle, *Knopfmann*, 1972.
<http://dirimart.org/tr/artists/2/thomas-bayrle>

Early on during the project I realized what an unachievable undertaking I had committed to in trying to understand and map out personality formation. The

way the human mind experiences the world is

beyond complete understanding. Personality

development is a multifaceted, infinite operation

that cannot be fully understood. The idea that experience can be concentrated into a single, knowable fact is, upon reflection, inconceivable. Artist Thomas Bayrle

(Image 8) , who does work with image repetition states, “There is a futility in trying

⁶ Jonathan Goodman. “Shuli Sade, Thinking in Time,” *Sculpture Magazine*, vol. 31 (2012): 34.

to find a singular image that stands for an entire system, as a solution both in terms of material and content – that can show the real madness of it all clearly.⁷ This does not negate that fact that introspection can lead to a broader and fuller understanding of oneself. Here is a mystery embedded in life that cannot be fully known, in no way do I understand how I understand.

Association

The second layer of the project pertains to wall tiles. Thirty-one tiles, one for each day of January, were hung on the gallery walls in chronological order (Image 9). Each wall tile corresponds to a specific day, the tiles are decorated with the same surface as the block forms from that day. Each tile is labeled with the day it corresponds to, a title, and the number of forms that share the same surface. For example the title for day 31 is *Period*. I choose period because the project had become, in some ways, quite taxing and I was stating that I was glad that the journal aspect of the project was over and that this was the end of the “sentence,” if you will.

The wall tiles basically function as a glimmer of meaning, and are ultimately

(Image 9) Thomas Stollar, *Metonymic Exhibition*, 2012.



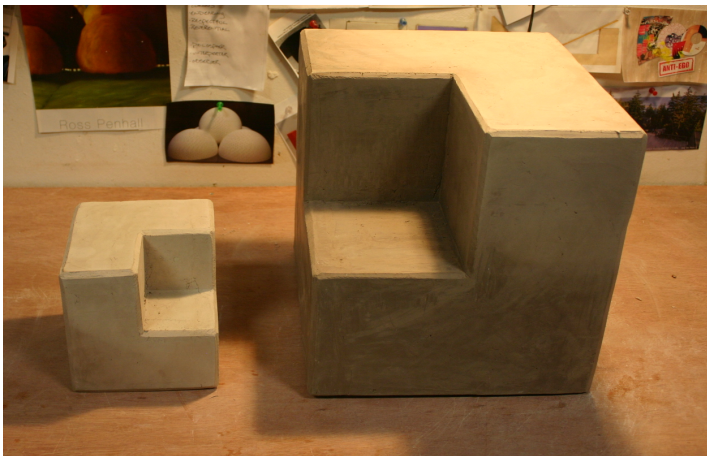
⁷ Daniel Birnbaum. “Thomas Bayrle,” *Art Forum*, no. 10 (2002): 137.

bits of information. The tiles act as a key. They inform the viewer which blocks correspond to particular days within the journal. They also enable the viewer to investigate connections between the blocks, and the journal. Labeling the tiles and including titles was a way to indicate, or hint at the experience that is represented, and raise curiosity. They aim to interest the viewer to investigate a little deeper into the project's intentions, in hopes that they might discover similarities within their own lives.

Analytic

"...In this age of the big and the blowsy, [objects] constitute a last resort. They remind us that most of the things we make in this world are prose."⁸

-Dave Hickey, "Foreword" *Ron Nagle*.



(Image 10) Thomas Stollar, *Sculptural Forms*, 2012.

At the beginning of the project a decision had to be made about the shape and size of the sculptural objects that were going to be used. The shape of the blocks came from a personal evaluation of how a thought might be manifested

⁸ Dave Hickey. "Foreword," *Ron Nagle*. (Arlington, Texas: Silver Gate, 2010).

in physical form (Image 10). Looking at the way mankind builds with such a strong adherence to the understandable shapes of square, rectangle, triangle, and circle, it seems evident to me that the mind often operates in a logically mathematical way. When I reflect on the manner in which I often think, aesthetics I am drawn to, or the way that I organize, there is a clear connection to analytical modes of systemization. This observation led me to design the sculptural forms with logic and rationality in mind. Since I was making conscious decisions about the importance of certain experiences, and treating them as separate I wanted the blocks to reflect the same intentional distinction.

The resolved shape comes from an adherence to rationality as well as my aesthetic attraction to minimal design. The forms are based on simple objects, and carry connections with Minimalist concepts like the maxim “A cube is a cube.”⁹ In this way the objects offer no consolation or expectation: They create an awareness within the viewer that is not transcendent, but instead enable a focus on the object’s presence, and in turn the viewers own. Also by subtracting all unnecessary parts the forms have greater arrangement possibilities. Franco Bertoni states that “This evolution of design came about through subtraction according to a concept that constantly eliminated the non-essential, preserving and even improving the function,”¹⁰ in regards to Minimalistic ways of designing.

The two differently sized prototypes of the forms were originally created from wood, and a two-part plaster mold was cast from the prototypes. The larger size ensured that the forms would be big enough to impact their environment, and

⁹ Franco Bertoni. *Minimalist Design*, (Berlin: Birkhauser, 2004), 98

¹⁰ Bertoni, *Minimalist Design*, 76

yet not be so big that they would be unmanageable to create in the studio. The smaller form is the exact size of the recess taken from the larger, and was developed to reinforce the logical aspect of the work, as well as create aesthetic interest through difference and contrast.

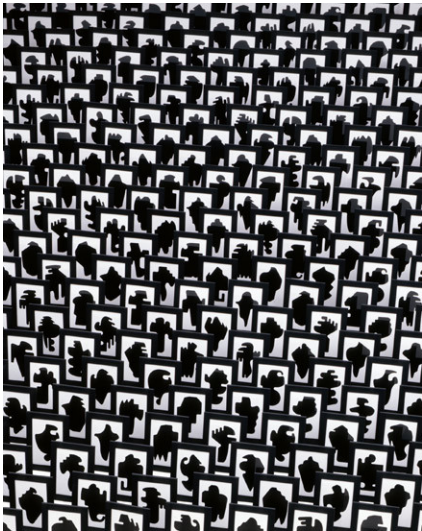


(Image 11) Thomas Stollar, *Molds*, 2012.

Molded

The use of molds creates a strong conceptual connection to industry and production of consumer goods (Image 11). In this case the “goods” are actually individual blocks, no two being the same

because of their handmade nature, and the fact that they are founded on very unique experiences. Art writer Craig Owens makes a statement in regards to Allan



(Image 12) Allan McCollum, *The Shapes Project*, 2006.
<http://artnews.org/artist.php?i=238>

McCollum’s work (Image 12) that seems prevalent In this case, “Difference itself becomes an object of consumption, and the agenda of serial production becomes apparent: to carefully engineer and control the production of difference...”¹¹

On an assembly line workers are assigned a certain task. Metaphorically speaking this idea of the assembly line emulates the view that *Metonymic* takes of the personality. Experience after experience building upon one another, the

¹¹ Craig Owens, “Alan McCollum,” *Los Angeles, A.R.T. Press* (1996), 21.

difference being with no notion of what they are leading to or how they define one another.

Materiality

Ceramic materials have a historic significance of permanence. Many of the artifacts that survive historic cultures come from ceramic shards that archeologists uncover. This idea of permanence as a physical manifestation contrasts completely with the metaphysical nature of experience. Often times we do not think of experiences as physical, and yet there is an enduring nature to experiences, as they become memories.

The manipulatable nature of clay also possesses connections to experience and personality. Clay can become almost any shape if manipulated correctly. The introspection inherent to the project enabled me to recognize that my reactions to a situation were

(Image 13) Thomas Stollar, *Molds*, 2012.



instrumental to its outcome. In the same way clay has its own nature but is malleable enough to change. The forms were all individually press molded (Image 13). The mundane repetition of activity created a calm within each day that catalyzed self-reflection, and ultimately fostered more in depth analysis of the journal's contents.

All of the forms and tiles were created using clay. Most of which were decorated using ceramic materials, such as glaze, underglazes and stains. The project was not meant to highlight the use of ceramic processes. Instead, material choices were chosen on the grounds of concept, and practicality. For example the



surface of day 15 (Image 14), *Good Propaganda* is created using commercial printing processes. By screen-printing the Ben Day Dots used in newspaper printing, and manipulations of screen position an

(Image 14) Thomas Stollar, *Good Propaganda*, 2012.

abstraction took place that erased any idea of an understandable message. As propaganda is usually used in communicating a certain political message I wanted to create a propaganda that did not have a discernable meaning and instead enables the viewers to create their own meaning.

Another example of non-ceramic material use come from the forms of Day 14, *Ode to Malevich*. These are covered with a commercial product known as Tool Dip to generate a matte, plastic looking black that absorbs light well (Image 15).



(Image 15) Thomas Stollar, *Ode to Malevich*, 2012.

The piece references Russian, Suprematist Kazimir Malevich's notable painting *Black Square* [1915], and its influence on abstraction.

Arranged

Brain Researcher Wolf Singer believes that there is no real center within the brain, no space that controls everything. Rather, depending on the situation, spontaneous connections or constellations develop because of the various formations of cells.¹² In the same way there is no situation within the final sculpture of *Metonymic* that acts as the center. As the pieces stack and are arranged on top of one another they become dependent on one another. The placement of one decides the placement of the next, both aesthetically and structurally as they are stacked in various positions depending on their environment and like one's personality the pieces can be manipulated, and changed.

The sculptural blocks as an installation were meant to act as a physical metaphor of thought. The comparison is meant to be outlandish, and yet what form would better fit such complexity? Just like fragments of experience the blocks are as simple as they are complex depending on how closely they are examined. As experiences can be individualized so too can the pieces of the installation, and yet just like experiences they rely on one another for meaning and support. The

¹² Wolf Singer. *Cognitive Neuroscience: Research Directions In Cognitive Science*, (London: Psychology Press, 1991), 27.

sculptural instillation of *Metonymic* was meant to accentuate the vast abstract possibilities of personality, and the intricacies of human experience.



(Image 16) Thomas Stollar, studio detail, 2012.

During this process I was making as many of the sculptural blocks as possible (Image 16). There were four press molds, two of the larger size and two of the smaller. Filling the molds with clay was

time consuming and the pieces needed to stay in the molds for an extended period of time to ensure that the clay would harden and the shape would remain exact. At most I could create around 8 blocks in one day, but each day the number of blocks that I was able to create differed depending on daily responsibilities. Each day the number created was catalogued, as the decoration process began for a certain day. The number of blocks that had been created on that day were decorated.

Decorating the blocks was a way to give them individuality, and to reference them to the chosen experiences. The decoration techniques were varied and multi-faceted.

For the viewer, the installation was meant to be intriguing, and to contain enough information without being overly literal. By presenting all three aspects of the project to the viewer, information was available, but only if the viewer investigated to collect it all. The sculptural pieces were meant to be overwhelming in a few spots, enough so that the viewer had to be aware of their own body in relation to the sculpture as they examined it. In this way the viewer becomes a part of the creative process by walking through or around the installation, shifting angles

with the piece allows the viewer a personal experience with the work,¹³ not to mention possible connections with similar experiences.

¹³ Jonathan Goodman. "Shuli Sade, Thinking in Time," *Sculpture Magazine*, vol. 31 (2012): 34.

Conclusion

This project helped me realize the multi-faceted, infinite nature of the human experience more fully. From my perspective an experience is shaped by many different factors, and depends on so many previous happenings that to fully understand such a thing is too complicated for the human mind to fully comprehend. That being said this project also helped me realize that no matter how complex an experience, using self-observation to look at seemingly unimportant, everyday experiences can be a useful tool in gaining understanding of oneself and environment. By presenting the viewer with experiences from my life I gave them a window into my mind, and a way for them to relate to my art in a personal way.

Metonymic attempts to tell a story about the beauty of the seemingly unsubstantial, and to present the viewer with an artwork that has the possibility of relating to them personally. I set up the installation to be spatially encompassing, and to contain circumstances that the viewer might relate to. The project endeavored to escape the confines of the art object as the sole investiture of meaning, by creating the possibility that the viewer's own experiences might resonate with mine. The art object is still important in *Metonymic*, but it attempted to move beyond the historic confines of ceramic traditions, by presenting a clear window into the processes used for inspiration and a clear reflection of the importance of daily life and the individual.

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